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ONE OF OUR OWN

Heather Schmidt is a product of Alberta's outstanding musical culture—and the world is taking notice.

By GEORGE FENWICK

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AT FIRST THE MUSIC SPARKLES with energy, the orchestra generating dazzling colours and frenetic movement. The solo pianist inscribes razor-sharp chords, echoed by fluttering gestures in the high wind instruments. The majesty of the entire orchestra is unleashed.

Then the instruments subside, and the piano descends into its lowest register. The deepest, darkest tones of the solo tuba indicate that the phoenix, the mythical bird whose story has been told since ancient Egyptian times, has reached the end of its 500-year life cycle. Within quietly shimmering piano figurations, life begins to stir. Once again, the phoenix bursts back to life, the pianist's triumphant arpeggios soaring above the brilliant sound of 60 musicians in full flight. The piece ends triumphantly, and the audience leaps to their feet to show their appreciation for the musical journey they have experienced, and to applaud the magnificent performance of the soloist, who also happens to be the composer of the work.

It is the world premiere of a musical triumph. The place is Calgary, on November 26, 2005. The orchestra is the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra under the expert guidance of conductor emeritus Mario Bernardi. And the soloist and composer of *Phoenix Ascending* is Calgary's own Heather Schmidt.

Heather Schmidt is a rarity in the musical world. Most musicians would consider themselves fortunate to build a successful career as a performer *or* as a composer. Schmidt is in demand throughout North America and in Europe in both capacities. "It's only in the recent century that the two roles have become separate," she says. "As a performer I find that I perform with a composer's insights, and likewise music that I write is affected by my experience as a performer. They're really intertwined."

At 32, Schmidt has accomplished more than many musicians twice her age. She has performed in solo recitals and with major symphony orchestras throughout North America, and recently toured Northern Europe with cellist Shauna Rolston. In addition to her four piano concertos and a cello concerto written for Rolston, Schmidt has written several works for orchestra, chamber ensemble and solo piano. She's booked into the 2007/08 season for performances and commissioned compositions, including the test piece for the 2006 Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary. Many of Schmidt's works have been released on CD, including three pieces on her 2003 solo disc "Solus," on the Centrediscs label.

How did Schmidt become such a mature artist so young? Innate talent certainly plays a large part in this success story, but Schmidt credits Albertan musical institutions and influences—the Mount Royal College Academy, the Banff Centre, composer Allan Bell, piano instructors Dale Jackson and Janice McCubbin—as invaluable formative forces.

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AT THE AGE OF 4, Heather arrived for her first lesson at the studio of Janice McCubbin, better known to Calgarians as Janice Thoreson. McCubbin, who now has retired to White Rock, BC, taught piano for over 30 years in Calgary. In 1980 she co-founded, with fellow Calgarian Roberta Stephen, the Alberta Keys music publishing company, which specializes in works for young musicians by Canadian composers.

By the time Schmidt began lessons, McCubbin had developed an unorthodox and creative approach to teaching piano: she encouraged her students to imagine and improvise their own sounds in addition to learning previously composed music. Schmidt says, “not many teachers encourage their students to compose, but I was doing that by the end of my first year of piano lessons, and that was very important. I think I would have come to composing eventually anyway because I was always hearing music in my head, but it was fostered at an early age.” Schmidt’s early interest in composition was also fostered by her explorations and research at the Canadian Music Centre (CMC) Prairie Region office on the U of C campus. Her mother, Barbara, says that Heather spent a great deal of time in the CMC’s listening room. That connection has now come full circle. Schmidt is an associate composer of the CMC, and students now come to the same room to hear recordings of her music.

Schmidt incorporates McCubbin’s ideas into her own teaching, as she too believes that encouraging children to improvise at the piano stirs their imaginations, helping them to listen and become more engaged in the process of music making.

Schmidt also writes pieces for young pianists, available through her publishing company, Echo Music. At the request of Calgary piano teacher Dale Jackson, with whom Schmidt

studied between the ages of 11 and 17, she wrote a series for young people called *Phantasms*. Jackson was delighted. “She’s got pieces based on werewolves and the Headless Horseman. There’s such a diversity of imagination for kids of that age, and she intrigues them into exploring 21st-century musical concepts.”

Jackson introduced Schmidt to the Mount Royal College (MRC) Academy of Music. It turned out to be an ideal atmosphere for young Heather, and she soaked up the opportunities. The academy offers a variety of experiences

for young musicians, including individual instruction, performances with large and small ensembles and access to world-renowned visiting artists.

“One of our key philosophies with our programs at the conservatory is to help develop artists, and to meet them at the point they’re at,” says Paul Dornian, director of the MRC Conservatory.

According to Schmidt, “The academy was great because they offer weekly master classes with top musicians from around the world—people who come in to perform with the philharmonic or in other concerts. It was very exciting to meet and be able to play for these people and also to be in a class of other accomplished pianists at a young age.”

Schmidt took advantage of the unusual opportunity to write pieces and perform them with her young colleagues. This was unprecedented at the academy. But, in keeping with the mandate to “meet them at the point they’re at,” Schmidt was provided with a most precious resource for a budding composer—a willing pool of accomplished young musicians with whom to experiment.

Jackson recalls, “She immediately did a cello sonata, which was really quite stunning for her age, 13, and then she did a trio based on Scottish folk tunes, modern and with-it, with unusual slides and techniques for the instruments, and she already had some idea of what these instruments could do. There was something impressive about what she did, and we were always moved and touched.”

The MRC academy also provided access to master classes at the Banff Centre Music and Sound program. The two institutions are close philosophically: like MRC, the Music and Sound curriculum is artist-centred, with programs created for each participant according to her particular talents and needs. Both institutions have an excellent reputation throughout the musical world, as demonstrated by the long list of distinguished musicians who have benefited from their programs. Tom Rolston, who recently retired as artistic director of Music and Sound’s winter cycle, says, “One of my hobbies is to pick an

orchestra from anywhere on the Internet and go through all the personnel. I always find someone from Banff.”

It was natural that in her late teens Schmidt began to attend summer programs and undertake residencies at the Banff Centre, again as both performer and composer. She says her time there was a very important part of her musical development, citing a three-week program with visiting pianist Gyorgy Sebok as “a formative experience.” Of sessions with Rolston and his wife, Isobel, she says, “The Rolstons are wonderful. I learned a lot from working and interacting with them.”



Top: Maestro Mario Bernardi (left) with Heather Schmidt and her manager, Michael Dufresne.

Bottom: Jazzman John Reid (left) with Schmidt and her former teacher, composer Allan Bell. Studying with Bell was “a profound experience,” according to Schmidt.

Remarkably enough, although Schmidt worked closely with Tom and Isobel Rolston during her late teens, it wasn't until 1998 that she met and began her professional collaboration with their daughter Shauna, another fine Albertan musician who has made her mark internationally. At that time, Heather was commissioned to write a cello concerto for Shauna (available on the 2001 CBC recording *This Is the Colour of My Dreams*), but they didn't perform together until 2001, at the Winnipeg New Music Festival.

Schmidt says, "From the first 30 seconds of playing together, we looked at each other and it just clicked. We've been performing more and more together ever since." Schmidt has already written *Icicles of Fire* as a duet for herself and Rolston. She was also commissioned by the Harvard Musical Society to write a piece for cello and piano, which was performed in the spring of 2006.

It should be no surprise that Tom Rolston worked closely with Allan Gordon Bell, now one of Canada's leading composers, at the Banff Centre and the University of Alberta long before Bell became Schmidt's composition instructor. As Bell embarked on his career as a composer, Rolston assisted him by performing his violin pieces and offering collegial advice.

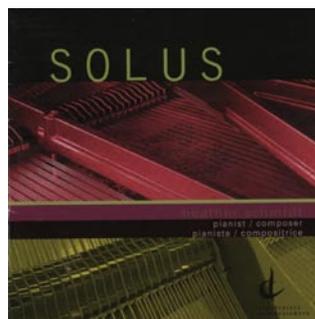
The advice must have been excellent. Bell's music has been performed and broadcast on four continents, and he has been featured on many recordings, notably "Spirit Trail," the CBC recording of five of his orchestral works, performed by the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra. Most recently, his "Lumen, Simulacra" was included on the CD "Rollin' Down #1" by Calgary's Land's End Chamber Ensemble.

Bell is a professor of music at the University of Calgary, and many of his students have become fine and well-known composers in their own right. Between his academic commitments and the demands he faces as a composer, Bell usually has no time to give private composition lessons. Schmidt proved the exception to this rule: between the ages of 14 and 17, she studied with him one-on-one. Although she later went on to study at Indiana University and at the Juilliard School with many other composers of international stature, she says Bell "is without question the most important figure in my compositional development... he opened up my musical understanding."

Bell introduced her to all the compositional tools she needed to express her musical ideas, and helped her identify her own style. Schmidt says the influence of her "mentor" has extended beyond music. "He's a very wise person and has a lot of depth, so being around him and working with him was a profound experience."

At 18, when Schmidt went to study at Indiana, she again resisted the musical community's imperative to choose between composition and performance. She not only became the youngest person ever to receive a doctor of music degree from that celebrated faculty, but was also awarded a major in both disciplines. She continued her studies at Juilliard in New York City with Milton Babbitt and renowned piano instructor Yoheved Kaplinsky, and subsequently moved to Dallas, where she now makes her home.

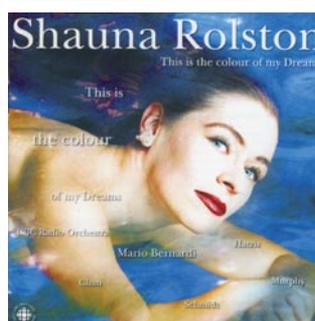
About Schmidt: The CDs



Solus

(Centrediscs, 2004)

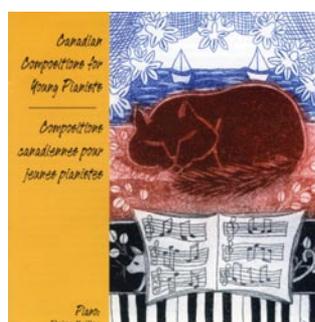
Schmidt performs Canadian piano music by herself, Allan Gordon Bell and others. This disc won the 2003 Best Canadian Music Recording award from *Opus Magazine*. As Bob Clark noted in the *Calgary Herald*, "The eight pieces featured on the album share ties not only to Alberta, but also a series of student/teacher relationships spanning three generations."



This Is the Colour of My Dreams

(CBC Records, 2001)

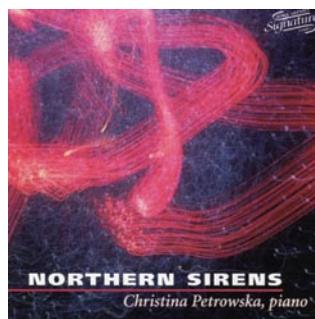
A solo effort from cellist Shauna Rolston, this collection concludes with Schmidt's *Concerto for Cello*. The album took the prize for Best Classical CD at the 2002 West Coast Music Awards.



Canadian Compositions for Young Pianists

(Studea Musica, 2000)

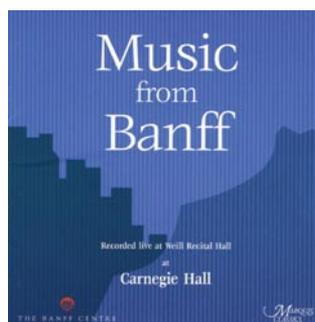
Elaine Keillor performs several pieces, including Schmidt's *Charms*, on this two-CD set designed to introduce junior Canadian pianists to their national music heritage.



Northern Sirens

(York Fine Arts, 1999)

Piano compositions by five Canadian women, including Schmidt, are performed by Christina Petrowska Quilico, who is widely heralded as one of Canada's leading interpreters of Canadian piano repertoire.



Music from Banff

(Marquis Classics, 1998)

Banff Centre musicians perform works by a variety of composers, including Brahms, Bartók, Mendelssohn and Schmidt—her *Phantoms* is played by the Miami-based Amernet String Quartet.

Keys to Excellence

IN JUST 14 YEARS the Honens International Piano Competition has established itself as one of the world's most prestigious piano events. It was the brainchild of the late Esther Honens, a successful Calgary businesswoman and music lover who, in 1991, donated \$5-million for an endowment to underwrite the enterprise.

"Esther Honens wanted Calgary to become a centre of excellence for music," says Stephen McHolm, executive director of Honens. "We hope that Calgarians will be inspired by our community outreach programs and concerts as well as by the competition." Honens pursues that goal through programs such as their free concerts and their Young Composers Project. The latter, developed with composer Allan

Bell, gives over 400 students per year an opportunity to explore composition.

As a competition, Honens is distinguished by their search for "the complete artist." Past laureates have, of course, demonstrated technical mastery of the piano, but have also shown themselves to be sensitive chamber musicians (unlike other competitions, Honens requires each quarter-finalist to perform an entire recital with guest artists), able improvisers, and, most importantly, mature musicians, communicating a deep understanding of the works they perform.

Laureates receive artistic and career development assistance, which past winners such as Calgarian Katherine Chi (winner of the 2000 event) have found invaluable.

Chi will be on hand during this year's

competition to take part in MSL 3.0: Competition Crash Course, a series of music appreciation sessions. Heather Schmidt will also take part in this program, in addition to her role as consultant to the jury regarding performances of her commissioned piece.

The quarterfinals of the fifth triennial Honens International Piano Competition will take place October 19 to 25 at the Rozsa Centre on the University of Calgary campus. Twelve pianists will advance to the semifinals (October 27-29, also at the Rozsa). Five finalists will perform with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra at the Jack Singer Concert Hall on November 4 and 5. The winner will be announced on the final night. All events are open to the public.

—George Fenwick

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IS THERE AN ALBERTAN MUSICAL STYLE? Much of Allan Bell's music evokes specific places and their characteristics, as in his "a great arch softening the mountains," which describes the cloud formations that herald the coming of the chinook winds.

Schmidt says the connection between her music and the Alberta landscape is not as specific as it is with Bell. "Yet I do love the big, open sky here," says Schmidt. "I was born and raised here till I was 18, so the geography and everything affected me. People often comment on the wide spacing I have both in my orchestral work and my piano works. It's very vast in a certain sense. I don't think it's a direct representation but [growing up in Alberta has] definitely impacted what I write."

If it is unclear whether one can specifically hear Alberta in Schmidt's music, it is very clear that one can often hear Schmidt's music in Alberta. She is committed to maintaining her strong ties with the region. The premiere of her *Phoenix Ascending* concerto was the centrepiece of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra's "Canadian Celebration" concert to mark the 25th anniversary of the Canadian Music Centre Prairie Region office in Calgary, as well as the 50th anniversary of the orchestra, and Alberta's centennial. In February 2005, she performed a well-received solo recital of music by women composers for New Works Calgary. The concert included the world premiere of *Night Rainbows*, dedicated to her late grandfather. Like *Phoenix Ascending*, it depicts a journey from despair and darkness into light.

Those who have been fortunate enough to hear Schmidt's recent works comment on their appeal to a wide spectrum

of music lovers. MRC's Paul Dornian says her music is "intellectually challenging... but appeals to an audience who... may not think of themselves as proponents of new music."

He adds that the same qualities apply to her performances. "She knows how to structure a performance to be very communicative." Schmidt says her music's appeal may be due to her concern with communication. Audiences, she suggests, react to the emotions that inspire the music. Mike Wall, head of artistic operations for the CPO, agrees that Schmidt's performance resonated with the audience during the Canadian Celebration concert, saying he sensed "intensity and feeling" in the standing ovation following the performance of *Phoenix Ascending*.

Calgary audiences will hear a new composition by Schmidt during the Honens International Piano Competition this fall. Schmidt's commissioned piece will be performed by the quarterfinalists—21 of the finest young pianists in the world. According to Julie Wright, the communications director for Honens, "Heather, like Alberta composers Allan Gordon Bell and Kelly-Marie Murphy before her, will add a uniquely Albertan perspective to the music performed at the competition."

Heather Schmidt is a singular talent, and in a very short time she has reached remarkable heights on the international musical scene. She is capable of taking both experienced and novice audiences along with her on incredible musical journeys using no more than her fertile imagination and her nimble fingers.

Albertans can be justifiably proud that during her early years in the province, equally outstanding individuals and institutions helped develop her talent and provided her with the skills, knowledge and inspiration to propel her onto the world stage. She is one of our own. ■

George Fenwick is a musician whose day job is at the Prairie Region Canadian Music Centre at the University of Calgary.